

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

Can I begin by saying that we are being encouraged to “theme” so many different Sundays now that it seems to be a competitive market? Whether it is ‘Prison Sunday’ ... ‘Homelessness Sunday’ ... ‘Safeguarding Sunday’, you name it – they each demand a great deal of our attention, prayer, care, and response. So imagine if you are the preacher for today on..., yes, ‘Stewardship Sunday’!

Of course, and this is a trade secret, I am not obliged with you to keep any of these ‘special’, designated Sundays. Our Benefice can embrace them, select some of them or, ignore all of them. My own view is that, like our annual flu or Covid jabs (if you are a certain age) it is helpful to be reminded about certain aspects of our ‘belonging in Christ’ which may help us to improve and build upon our attention, prayer, care and responses to certain areas of our common life, and energise our communal life, as a result.

So often and, coincidentally, our focus on particular issues and concerns, can prompt and increase our bonds of love and trust and outreach. Last year, was it, we gained more prison visitors from ‘Prison Sunday’ because existing visitors encouraged us to find out more? Our friends from within this congregation talked in their own words about the needs and the gifts we could offer and, volunteer, for just a few hours per week. Christian charity depends upon new recruits as well as renewed commitment.

Is today any different? If you stop giving by direct debit, by gift aid, by any which digital way, this Church would have to close and call it a day. Despite all the 'fake news' that the Church of England is sitting on billions of 'hidden assets' from its colonial past...ask any of your local clergy about the state of their Rectories and Vicarages! Ask any Diocesan Bishop about the real economic state of everyday church finances and you will see any smiles turn into a grimace. And I say this having heard so many wonderful PCC Treasurers' and hard-working Diocesan Finance Treasurers' speak honestly and openly about the future as well as the present.

They speak not only with caution as the best treasurers do, but quite honestly and openly, that our institutional days really are numbered. Unless we turn this huge tanker of the Church of England around and concentrate instead on our mission to young families and children, and to those who feel completely marginalised by the faithful and committed few, our legacy and what we pass on will be scorned.

So stewardship is about people as well as finances. It is about how we plan - not for survival but instead, for growth. And my experience, like yours, is that you only support and help and invest in something which you passionately believe in.

I was a very naïve curate working in a very poor inner-city housing estate in Manchester visiting a wonderfully devout and kind parishioner who was dying. She said that she was going to leave everything to her Church and, mine at the time, All Saints and Martyrs, Langley. I was so excited by this I

reported back to my Vicar the next day! After she died, I heard some months later, that she had left everything to the 'Cats Protection League'. I don't believe for one moment that she was deceiving me but perhaps the Will she had made was twenty or thirty years out of date. I could be quite wrong of course. But we do tend to support financially what we care about most, at least in theory!

I am always shocked about how my mobile phone bill is so costly and all of us see costs rising 'invisibly' for insurance, utilities and so much more...and when this happens the costs of the Church seem to pale into insignificance. We forget that the Church is really just like our own homes and when the scaffolding wraps around us as now, those costs alone will be more than the actual repair and restoration ones!

I could go on but I feel embarrassed to push my luck. I do really appreciate those of you who give sacrificially, who don't want any limelight but simply keep on giving as in the parable of the widow's mite – silently, prayerfully and intentionally. You are the salt which gives flavour and hope for the present and future community of faith here, thank you! Who was it who said: "God loves a cheerful giver"?

Yes, it was that most challenging of God's Saints: St Paul (2 Corinthians 9, verse 7). Paul didn't want the believers in Corinth to give beyond their means "reluctantly or under compulsion." Most importantly, he wanted them to rely on their inner convictions: heart, soul, and mind.

AMEN.

